

Thank you for setting out your vision for the Commonwealth, Governor Inos.

And thanks to the 18th Northern Marianas Commonwealth Legislature for inviting me here today. Especially, I want to thank Speaker Joseph Guerrero and Senate President Ralph Torres. They worked very patiently to find a time, when both the Governor and I could be here.

Speaker Guerrero also understood my concern about this talk. As the first Delegate, representing the people of the Northern Mariana Islands in the United States Congress, I am very aware that whatever I do sets a precedent. I have to be careful not to create obligations that bind future Delegates: like an obligation to report to the Legislature. That's something future Delegates might not want. That's something this Legislature might not want. But I understand an obligation has been given to me, a responsibility, a once-in-history opportunity, as your first Delegate, to set the standards for what the people of the Marianas should expect from their representative in Congress.

Future Delegates may surpass me. I hope they do. But I think they will find I created a solid foundation of accessibility, accountability, and accomplishment they can build on. To be accessible I opened offices on Rota, Tinian, and Saipan; gave constituents a toll-free number to call me in Washington; and made myself available by e-mail and online. As a result, over 2,000 constituents – individuals, businesses, non-profits, government agencies – many I see in this audience – have reached out for help with their veterans benefits, their social security, a delayed passport, grant issues, or a hundred other cases large and small. Almost always, we help solve the problem.

To be accountable and transparent I began reporting to constituents every week with an e-newsletter sent to thousands of subscribers and posted on Facebook for my 17,000 friends. And midway through every Congress virtually every Commonwealth household gets my printed *Report to Constituents* in the mail. Of course, I can only report so often to the people I work for, if I have work to report. And I do:

\$32.5 million food stamp program signed into law, Submerged lands returned to the Northern Marianas, Obamacare keeps hospital open, More help for families to pay CUC bills, \$36 million to get 24-hour water for Saipan. These headlines—and the stories behind them— set a standard for getting things done – a standard the people of the Northern Marianas now know they should always expect from their representative in the United States Congress.

I hope that long after I retire – or voters grow tired of me – these high standards of accessibility, accountability, and accomplishment will live on and be my lasting legacy to you, as your first Congressman. That is the general philosophy that guides me. Now let's talk specifics. Setting goals When I began five years ago, our national government was in turmoil. The economy was collapsing. But Democrats had a majority in the House, a super-majority in the Senate, and President Barack Obama in the White House. There was a lot to do. But there was the political power to get things done. The situation created immediate opportunities to do good for the Marianas – a prime example: the Recovery Act, which brought the Commonwealth about \$120 million for education, energy, and to pay government salaries during the austerity. When so much is happening it is very important to have specific goals –and stay focused. I had five high-priority goals starting out in Congress. And I want to focus on those five goals in speaking to you today:

Number 1:

Get back our submerged lands.

Number 2:

Make the transition to federal immigration as “least difficult” as possible.

Number 3:

Keep the minimum wage going up without hurting the people who earn minimum wage.

Number 4:

Get families in the Northern Marianas the same food aid that other Americans get.

And Number 5:

Increase federal funding for education.

I only have fifteen minutes to report on five complex issues. So I will leave out a lot of detail.

But bottom-line: we achieved all five goals.

Number 1: Submerged lands. This was the first bill I introduced as your Congressman. The House passed it in 2009, 2011, and 2013 –unanimously each time. The Senate finally acted last year; and President Obama signed the law, conveying ownership of submerged lands to the Commonwealth. The new law gives us title just like every other U.S. coastal state and territory.

There was a catch, however. Existing federal law gives the President the power to keep any submerged lands in federal hands, where there is a national interest. This is what President Ford did in Guam. He kept Apra Harbor in federal hands –permanently and forever – because of the needs of the military. In American Samoa Ford kept Rose Atoll in federal hands – permanently – because the atoll is inside a national wildlife refuge. The same thing could have happened in the Marianas. We also have submerged lands where the military has an interest – around Tinian and Farallon de Medinilla. We also have lands inside a national wildlife refuge – around Maug, Uracas, and Asuncion. But President Obama took a different approach than President Ford. President Obama, first, transferred ownership around Rota, Saipan, Pagan – nine of our islands in all. Then, around the other five islands, where there is a federal interest, he held back – temporarily – and asked the Commonwealth for agreement on how those lands would be managed. For Maug, Uracas, and Asuncion this is exactly what former Governor Ben Fitial negotiated with President Bush, when the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument was created. They agreed the Commonwealth would manage its submerged lands. The federal government would manage the Monument. And both sides would coordinate that management. Last week, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA, and the Commonwealth finally started to talk about how to do this. I made clear to the federal agencies, when they came up to Congress for their budget hearings this spring, that I expect them to move quickly. And, today, I urge the Commonwealth to do the same, so the people can have their land. In the case of the submerged lands around Tinian and Farallon, President Obama asked for assurance that the military can continue training there. Now the leases, which our Covenant negotiators approved, already include not just the land on Tinian and Farallon, but also the surrounding waters. And for 35 years the military used those leased lands and waters without incident. So it should be possible to agree that training can continue, as it always has, under terms of our existing lease. Then, the President can transfer title. Again, I encourage both sides to finalize these agreements, so that the people of the Northern Marianas can finally have ownership of the submerged lands around all our islands – as provided in Public Law 113-34, the law I had enacted.

Our second high priority goal: Make the transition to federal immigration as “least difficult” as possible. Some problems you choose. Some problems choose you. When I came to Congress, the Consolidated Natural Resources Act, was already law. Federal immigration was scheduled to start in five months. Do you remember how unprepared everyone was? Homeland Security had no lease for space at the airport. There were no computers set up for immigration. And the Commonwealth was in court arguing that the CNRA violated the Covenant. So I went to work. I got a hearing in Congress. I got the Hispanic Caucus to speak up. I got former Governor Ben Fitial, HANMI, and the Saipan Chamber to make their case. And with one day to spare Secretary Janet Napolitano agreed to a six-month delay. That gave everyone more time to get ready and avoided disaster. I used the time to work on what I thought most important: keeping Chinese and Russian tourists coming to our islands. Remember, this was the year our economy plunged 19 percent. We could not afford to

lose a single tourist. So, I invited two delegations of Congressmen to fly in, see the situation first-hand, and hear from Governor Fitial, then-Lt. Governor Inos, and our business community. I met with the White House. I met with Napolitano. And these efforts succeeded. In October 2009, the Secretary put in place a one-of-a-kind tourist parole system just for the Marianas. That system continues to pay benefits. It brought 135,000 Chinese tourists here the last year. This April and May, China was our biggest market, bigger than Korea, bigger than Japan. Because of the parole system. But making immigration as “least difficult” as possible didn’t end there. There was one problem after another to solve—and I did. What happens to families with man’amko who need caretakers? Solved: We got caretaker paroles for those 135 families. What about people who had permanent resident status under Commonwealth immigration law? The CNRA forgot about them. But I wrote legislation to protect them: first, H.R. 1466, then, Section 2109 of the immigration bill the U.S. Senate passed last year. And, seeing what I wanted, Homeland Security gave parole to 127 of those permanent residents, so they can stay. What about our neighbors – the family next door – where one spouse is a U.S. citizen and the other is not? They don’t have the money to get mom or dad a green card. They can’t pay thousands of dollars in fees. I argued for parole for those family members, and today 1,102 are safe. I kept those families together. But parole is temporary – and discretionary.

The Obama administration will keep it. But what happens in 2017 under the next President? We need permanent solutions – in the law. Yet this Legislature – a majority of this House, I should say – opposes my efforts to fix federal immigration law. House Resolution 18-34. Where do I begin?

Well, I began, as most Members of Congress would, by sending Resolution 18-34 to the attorneys at the Congressional Research Service for analysis. Let me summarize the results:

18-34 makes three broad claims about my language in the Senate immigration bill: that it violates the self-government and mutual consent provisions of Covenant Sections 103 and 105; that it amends Section 506 of the Covenant; and that my language gives green cards or citizenship to aliens. Claim number one is the same argument that Governor Fitial made to try to block the CNRA. But the court ruled against him on November 25, 2009; and three days later federal immigration began. The Governor could have appealed the decision. He did not. He accepted that the CNRA does not violate the Covenant. Yet House Resolution 18-34 rehashes the same failed argument all over again. And when CRS attorneys report to Members of Congress that the court already rejected this argument, then House Resolution 18-34 simply loses credibility.

As for the second claim, that the Senate immigration bill amends Section 506 of the Covenant, the Congressional Research Service says no. Because Section 506 was repealed by the CNRA. 506 cannot be amended, it no longer exists. When Members of Congress see this obvious legal error, again, Resolution 18-34 loses credibility. Finally, the third claim, that my language, Section 2109 of the Senate bill, gives green cards or U.S. citizenship to aliens. That, too, is simply false. Here is what the Congressional Research Service says: “Section 2109 does not automatically grant any status to any long-term foreign resident of the CNMI.” Let me repeat: “Section 2109 does not automatically grant any status to any long-term foreign resident of the CNMI.” Again, House Resolution 18-34 got it wrong.

Look, anyone can have an opinion about public policy – and post it on the Variety website. That’s fine. But when Northern Marianas legislators send a formal, legal document to the Vice President of the United States and the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives that is so full of mistakes, you make us all look a little foolish. I wish you had been more careful. I wish you had held a hearing on your resolution – before you voted. Maybe these mistakes could have been avoided.

Of course, I understand. The real fear behind House Resolution 18-34 is that more and more voters in the Marianas are not Chamorros or Carolinians. But let’s remember why: Not because of federal immigration law. Because of the immigration law the Commonwealth Legislature enacted 30 years ago.

The Clinton Presidential Library recently lifted restrictions on its internal memos about the Marianas. It's interesting: *Half the babies being born there are not indigenous people. We have to do something.* That was the Clinton administration speaking, 20 years ago. But the Commonwealth hired Jack Abramoff to block Clinton from acting. And the Commonwealth kept its doors wide open. So, when people complain today that federal immigration law will change our future voting population, I have to say, you are too late. Federal law is not changing who votes. It is Commonwealth law, the decision this Legislature made three decades ago, that changed our population and is changing who votes. Some people don't like to hear that truth. But I am not going to spend my time arguing with them about the past or laying blame for past decisions. There is too much work to do, going forward, to make this transition as "least difficult" as we can. That means stretching it out for another five years — which Governor Inos and I successfully convinced Labor Secretary Perez to do this month — giving us more time to train locals and replace 10,000 CWs with U.S. workers.

That means keeping the bar on asylum — and legislation I got through the Senate this month will do that — so our Chinese tourism can continue to grow. That means continuing to work to keep our population numbers up and families together, so our economy prospers and our society is strong. Immigration. So complex. And I still have three more high priority goals to tell you about.

Number 3:

Keep minimum wage rising without hurting the people who earn minimum wage. When I came into office, minimum wage was four dollars and five cents an hour. Today, it is five-fifty-five. In September, it goes to six-oh-five. That's a big jump in five short years. And, according to the Government Accountability Office, the minimum wage has gone up faster than prices. Not much, but a little. It may not feel like it, but people earning minimum wage are not falling behind. They are doing better. And we are talking about a lot of people. GAO says that when minimum wage reaches the federal level in 2018 more than 80 percent of our workers will be effected. That compares to 5 percent nationwide who earn minimum wage. That's why we have to watch the wage very closely — and, yes, why I changed the law twice to stretch out the increases. Because any change in the wage has a large impact on our economy. And, as you know, our economy has been hard hit over the last decade. I know some say the wage should rise faster. This Legislature could make it happen. 22 U.S. states legislated a minimum wage above the federal level. The Seattle City Council just passed a \$15 an hour minimum wage. Guam is looking to raise the minimum wage. You could do the same. But I have taken a more careful approach. I use the advice of the economists at GAO. I watch our Gross Domestic Product, monitor tourist arrivals. And I think we have the right balance: The minimum wage is rising, faster than prices. Our economy is getting stronger. Existing businesses are adjusting. New investors are here. And as the wage continues to rise it should bring more local workers off the sidelines and into the workforce. So, we met the goal of raising the wage without hurting workers. Now I have a new goal: After we reach the U.S. minimum in 2018, I want us to keep going — remaining careful not to hurt workers or the economy. So, I am an original co-sponsor of H.R. 1010, which will lift the U.S. minimum to ten dollars and ten cents an hour and then tie the wage to the rate of inflation, so workers never fall behind again.

Goal number 4:

Get hungry families in the Northern Marianas the same food aid as other Americans. One of my guiding rules in Congress has been parity for the people of the Northern Marianas. Other coastal states own submerged lands; we should own submerged lands. Other Americans get \$7.25 an hour; our workers should get the same minimum wage. We are Americans. We shouldn't be short-changed by our national government. So I was shocked to learn, when I came to Congress, that when it comes to helping everyone have enough to eat, American families in the Northern Marianas only get half what families in Guam get. Four months into my first term I was already fixing that. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack gave me a fourteen percent increase — about \$1.5 million — to raise food benefits. And we locked that increase into the annual food stamp grant ever since. He also agreed to another \$1 million increase in 2011. Unfortunately, instead of getting help to people who needed food, the previous administration sat on the money and, eventually, had to return \$4.5 million to the

United States Treasury, unused. But we are now under new management. And let me here acknowledge the courage of Governor Inos, who as Acting Governor, against the wishes of Fitial, wrote to Secretary Vilsack, supporting my effort for more food aid. Today we are seeing the results: Agriculture has approved higher benefits for the people of Northern Islands, Rota and Tinian, where food costs are higher. On May 1st, families on Rota and Northern Islands went from \$444 a month to \$719, on Tinian to \$586. And the Governor and I continue working to get an increase for families on Saipan – even if I have to bring to the Commonwealth the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, or the Chief Administrator of FNS, or both.

But my real goal has been parity with other Americans. The reason Guam gets twice what we do is because Guam is in the national food stamp program. We are not. To get us into the national program I moved in 2011 to the Agriculture Committee, where the FARMM bill was up for renewal. This is another long story we don't have time for. I will just say that on February 7th President Obama signed the new FARMM law. And it includes \$32.5 million for a special pilot program in the Commonwealth, raising benefits and putting us on track to join SNAP, the national program. That's new money is on top of our annual grant. So we're looking at \$94 million in total, coming into our economy and feeding the poor over the next five years. I got this money and the program expansion to the Marianas at the same time that Republicans were shrinking the national program and cutting spending by \$9 billion. While everyone else was being cut. We got an increase. So I think we can feel very, very fortunate to be achieving our fourth goal: parity with other Americans when it comes to food aid.

Our last goal – Number 5 – was to increase federal funding for education. And we have. When I came into office, Northern Marianas College students got an average Pell grant under \$3,000. Last year, the average was over \$4,000. And the number of students getting the grants has nearly doubled – from 569 to 1,067. That's almost every undergraduate at NMC. Those grants do more than help the students. The money adds \$2.7 million to the budget each year, helping the College pay salaries and stay in operation. It was the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act that made those increased Pell grants possible. And I was one of the 22 original co-sponsors of that Act. The Act also gave NMC a \$7.5 million College Access Challenge Grant. Did you see in Friday's Variety that 500 students attended NMC's Cash for College workshop? That's what NMC is doing with the money I sponsored. Students get their \$75 NMC application fee waived. They get up to \$1,000 in scholarships for tuition and books. They get academic and career counseling. All paid for with the legislation I sponsored in Congress. I was also an original co-sponsor of the EduJobs Act that gave PSS \$8.3 million in 2011. That money paid the salaries of 798 teachers and support staff for two and a half pay periods. And it came just in time, because that year this Legislature cut \$7 million from PSS.

Today, as a member of the House Education Committee, I continue to work for PSS. Low income students in states get twice as much help as Marianas students do from the No Child Left Behind law. We need to change that. I want parity with other Americans. Fortunately, while we work to re-write the Act in Congress, the demographics have changed, so the PSS grant jumped from \$4 million to over \$7 million this year. And we will stay there every year for the next ten years – a 30 to 33 million dollar increase of new money in all. One final increase for education was the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund – \$36 million for PSS and NMC. This was part of the Recovery Act, a bill I voted on back in the day when Delegates were allowed to vote. PSS put the money to good use: paying teachers, providing computers for students, and weatherizing classrooms to lower CUC bills. But in return for that federal money the Commonwealth government promised not to lower local spending for education. And the Commonwealth broke its promise. We were the only state or territory that cut local spending – particularly sad, since we are also the U.S. area that spends the least to educate our children. Breaking a contractual agreement is not without consequences. The Commonwealth could be forced to pay that money back. And the federal government could take it by withholding other grant funds. So it will be employees at the agencies that could not exist without federal grants, who will pay the price for that broken promise.

I understand this Legislature faces difficult choices. You had to stop paying Retirement. You stopped paying for our hospital. You can't pay CUC. But, please, pay PSS and NMC the money you owe. Keep the promise you made to the federal government. More importantly, keep the promise you made to eleven-thousand students at PSS, eleven-hundred students at NMC, and to their families. Give those students the education they need to be successful for the rest of their lives. And I will help by continuing to bring in more federal aid for our schools, just as I have over the last five years.

Setting our sights ahead Changing federal law so the Commonwealth can own submerged lands...Making immigration as least difficult as possible...'Raising minimum wage without losing jobs...Giving Marianas families the same food aid as other Americans...Helping the children of the Marianas get the education they deserve. These were my top goals.

I think we got there. There will always be critics, who say it's not enough, or too slow. But as the late Senator Ted Kennedy used to say: even if you want the whole loaf, when you get the chance, take half. Then come back tomorrow and start working for the other half. So what about tomorrow? What are our future goals? Well, when we reach the seven-twenty-five minimum wage, I'll be working for ten-ten –without hurting workers or the economy. When the food stamp pilot ends in five years, my goal is to be included fully in the national program. I will keep working to increase funding for education, when Congress reauthorizes No Child Left Behind and the Higher Education Act. And I'll be working so that even before school age our youngest children are learning, and beyond school age people who need job training are helped.

My goal of making immigration less difficult will continue. Legislation I drafted to extend the bar on asylum, which is so important for our Chinese tourism, has already passed the Senate. The House Natural Resources Committee approved it and – let me announce today – it has been okayed by the Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. My goal is to get that bill enacted this year. My proposal that House Resolution 18-34 opposed is still pending, though the prospects for a comprehensive immigration bill this year are dim. My proposal does three simple things: It creates a new, CNMI-only status so certain groups of people may continue to live and work here – very much what the CNMI Senate recommended in 2011.

These are people allowed into the Commonwealth under Commonwealth law, who always stayed legal, and If they want to change status after five years, then, just as House Resolution 18-34 demands – and I quote – they “must go through the established process, pursuant to the Immigration and Nationality Act.”

No special treatment, no fast-tracking. Exactly what this Legislature says it wants. That proposal remains my goal.

I will also be focused on health. I want us fully included in Obamacare. If we were, Northern Marianas families making less than \$94,000 could get federal help to pay for insurance. It was reported this month that the average monthly premium after this Obamacare subsidy is \$82. \$82 a month for health insurance. Does that sound like a worthwhile goal for your family? I think so.

And for those of you who only listen to Fox News and break out in a rash at any mention of Obamacare, let me remind you: it was Obamacare that paid for our new Kagman Community Health Center.

And, when this Legislature killed funding for CHC, it was \$28 million from Obamacare that kept our hospital open. And there's another \$80 million where that came from.

And it was Obamacare that said I was required, not exempted, to purchase my health insurance from the DC health exchange. I'm proud I got us into Obamacare.

Sure, only half a loaf, but now, working with the Commonwealth Insurance Commissioner and the industry, I intend to get the rest. And one final goal, going forward: managing the military build-up. Let me be clear: I don't want bombs dropped on Pagan. And, like Governor Inos, I don't want the Air Force

using the Saipan airport for military exercises or weapons storage. Let me also remind you: the United States military works for the United States Congress. We set the policy. We pay the bills. Now, I am only 1 voice among 541 Members of Congress. But I have already been able to put the brakes on the Air Force, so they have to look at Tinian more seriously for their divert activities. I know that in the years ahead more and more of my attention will have to be on the military and what it wants to do here. Our Covenant negotiators understood that our islands would become important to national security. That's why they set aside the lands and waters of Tinian and Farallon de Medinilla for the military to use. Our women and men, who just returned safely home from Afghanistan, understand that the people of the Northern Marianas have a responsibility for America's defense. And the eighteen sons and daughters of the Marianas, who lost their lives during our wars in the Middle East, taught us that sometimes we have to give up what is most precious to protect our country.

The Mariana Islands sit on a troubled edge of the world. We have neighbors armed with nuclear weapons. We have neighbors challenging long-standing boundaries, claiming new rights in the air and resources in the sea. A strong American presence in the Marianas arc can help to stabilize that situation. And stability is good for the Marianas. Look at the economic loss when Asiana halts flights for a week. Imagine the disruption if a conflict cuts the flow of tourists from China. So we will defend our islands from the damage that the U.S. military could cause – as we have every right to do.

But at the same time let us remember the responsibility that we have – to our nation and to ourselves – to contribute to our nation's defense and help maintain America's strength in the western Pacific. America is our country. We chose to make it so. It was a choice we can be proud of. We can be proud because, as I have learned in Congress, no matter where you were born, no matter your age or ethnicity, Americans are willing to give you a chance and will reward hard work.

Look at me: an immigrant, the only Micronesian in Congress, a “non-voting” Delegate. But in only my third year in Congress I was given the Democratic leadership of the subcommittee with responsibility for all of America's oceans, fisheries, and wildlife, and, of course, insular areas. In this Congress my Democratic colleagues elected me to be a regional whip for the area that covers Northern California and all the Pacific. I have had great support from Democratic veterans like George Miller on education issues and minimum wage, and Senator Ron Wyden who helped us get submerged lands. But I have also been helped by Republican leaders like Chairman Doc Hastings on lands issues and Chairman Frank Lucas on food policy. And I cannot leave out Senators Lisa Murkowski, Bob Menendez and Jeff Flake. The fact is wherever I have turned in Congress, people have been willing to help. In the same way that Americans everywhere through their taxes – over \$200 million yearly -- have been willing to help us here in the Northern Mariana Islands.

For that we should all be grateful. Finally, I want to take this moment to recognize my most important colleagues. They do not get credit enough for what they do, but it is my colleagues from our Rota, Tinian, Saipan, and Washington congressional offices – your congressional staff – who are the foundation that allows me to do the work I do for our people and islands.

Thank you.
And God Bless the Northern Mariana Islands.